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SUBJECT: KOREAN NATIONALISM ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary. Prominent Korean researchers focused on Korean nationalism studies believe recent beef protests are motivated by what young Koreans see as a deviation from a basic expectation of equity among nations. A distinct divide separates the youth and adult protesters. The student-youth, born around 1990, are motivated by an inward-looking concern for their own health and frustration over the apparent lack of fairness of President Lee Myung-bak's agreement on beef, seen as full of concessions to the U.S. Older Koreans lack the student's expectation of fairness, and primarily object to President Lee's deal for U.S. beef as yet another symbol of Korean exploitation and victimization. As the students mature, this cognitive divergence may shape the efficacy of public diplomacy and eventually challenge basic Korean motivations for sustaining the US-Korean alliance. End summary.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) Interviews with two prominent ROK professors specializing in research on nationalism within developing nations, Dr. Kang Won-taek of Soongsil University and Dr. Lim Jie-hyun of Hanyang University of Seoul, suggest South Korean nationalism is more complex than conventional wisdom reflects. According to Dr. Kang's research, modern Korean youth, lacking specific memories of victimization, do not share a sense of oppression. South Korean adult nationalism tends to reflect the victimization ideology common to many lesser-developed nations with a colonial heritage.

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Origins of Korean Nationalism  
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[¶2.](#) (SBU) The roots of modern nationalist thought emerged during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945). Unlike many colonial relationships, Japan built considerable industrial capability in Korea while attempting to eliminate traditional Korean culture. By 1945 Korea accounted for approximately a quarter of the Japanese industrial base. This history of a foreign power simultaneously delivering oppression and opportunity resulted in mixed feelings toward foreign powers that still colors the South Korean perceptions of the US.

[¶3.](#) (SBU) Dr. Kang observed that anti-U.S. protests over the accidental deaths of two girls in 2002, hit by a U.S. military vehicle, reflected this oppression-opportunity conflict. The political manipulation of the event was steeped in colonial terms. This seemed to resonate well with

adults and in the traditional media. Editorials of the day noted, however, that students would rail against the apparent U.S. disregard for Korean life and then meet at McDonald's and share American pop music.

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Hope is for the Young  
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¶4. (SBU) Both professors agreed that South Korean students today have almost no personal relationship to Japanese oppression, the Korean War, or even the Cold War. Dr. Lim said students today often participate in US-related protests due to deliberate societal attempts to link nationalism and victimization. However, Dr. Kang said the notion that textbooks and curriculum, although designed to do so, fail to instill a sense of oppression into Korean youth. The students are now less likely than previous generations to incorporate victimization into their self-identity. He feels that nationalism defined by the old dual oppression-opportunity dynamic simply lost the sting of oppression. Today's ROK youth see the West as opportunity--albeit one to be met on their terms. Their presence in street protests against U.S. beef signals anger with the process of reaching the beef importation agreement -- seen as a gift to President Bush on the eve of the March Summit -- rather than a systemic rejection of the U.S.-ROK relationship.

¶5. (SBU) The idea that America would intentionally dump harmful or infected products in South Korea appears in the conventional media such as TV and print but, Dr. Kang notes, does little to motivate the youth. Instead, rapidly replicated text messages spur students' participation. These messages lack the idea of victimization central to previous

generations' sense of oppression, and instead offer the hope of empowerment. Unlike their parents, they are motivated by what they perceive as a deviation from a basic expectation of equity among nations. Drs. Kang and Lim both note that students now are more likely to protest South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's apparent exchange of Korean food safety for political expediency. Their parents, however, protest President Lee allowing Americans to once again take advantage of South Korean weakness.

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Comment  
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¶6. (SBU) The gradual loss of victimization identity within South Korea bodes well for US-Korean relations, but these professors' comments suggest that the U.S. should foster the sense of equity in its dealings with South Korea. The next generation entering positions of authority will likely be less conflicted by a dual desire for protection and liberation, but they appear attuned to South Korea being treated like the advanced industrial country that it has become. An emphasis on the U.S.-Korea Alliance as a global partnership is in accord with those concerns.

VERSHBOW